

THE SOCIAL-ECONOMY OF THOUGHT

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In Yoruba, my language, there is a strange expression called "in tele suasua". It almost rhymes with the word "intellectual." Actually, I believe it is a cynical corruption of the word. When re-translated literally to English, "in tele sua sua" could mean, "he walks about anyhow ". We could stretch the meaning. Among the endless possibilities, let's stay with two. The expression could mean one who tramps about without regard for anything, including tradition. It could also mean one who evidently has a mighty disdain for finesse.

To be sure, "In tele suasua" is a derogatory and emotive corruption. Its roots seem apparent. It must have issued from the mutual contempt that the newly learned and the uneducated shared after the introduction of Western education. That expression thus offers a window into a peculiar arena of power and the natural struggle for supremacy between the new and the old.

Two representations of the intellectual jut out here. One, an intellectual challenges orthodoxy, and is thus an obvious threat to the established power centre, whether religious, moral or political. And two, an intellect does not exude the physical trappings of power, caring little about his or her own appearance and well being, appearing too ordinary for his or her assumed or imagined importance.

The attempt to trace the meaning and origin of this expression might give a misleading impression. It shouldn't. The intellectual of the post-Western education period didn't drop from the sky. In terms of mission, vision and attitude, his or her ancestors were the poets, painters, philosophers and priests who have always existed in and dialogued with all organised societies, whether literate or not.

Poets, painters, philosophers and priests. They have always been with us, in varying degrees of sophistication and engagements. They occupy different realms- from the worldly to the otherworldly. They employ different platforms. But they manage a unity of purpose. They are individuals who use their intellects to shape and build societies, celebrating beauty, offering new sights and meanings, and dreaming new dreams. They are the merchants of thoughts. And they could serve as handy shorthand for the loaded word: intellectuals.

If we go back to our interpolations from that contempt-laden Yoruba expression, they are far from being mercantile though. Yet, they still tirade in something: their thoughts. Perhaps the only thing they share with shrewd merchants is that they dare to venture.

They are courageous. Yes, they are not afraid: of breaking down walls, of vending unpopular positions, of living in misery. Throughout times and ages, these representations have lingered. As it was in the pre-literate society, so it is today, and perhaps so shall it be. An intellectual is supposed to be defiant and selfless, rigorous and Spartan. He should be defined by the depth of his ideas and not of his purse.

We can turn this representation around. That an intellectual is defined by the poverty of his purse. An unfair stereotype and expectation this is. Yet this is one of the defining characteristics of an intellectual in my part of the world. I believe this could be a cultural universal. The world over, a wealthy or comfortable intellectual seems a major contradiction in terms. The established opinion, which even the thinkers have not been iconoclastic enough to overthrow, is that an intellectual should be close to a monk, that deprived and cloistered existence is a necessary condition for creativity and deep thinking. There have been two spin-offs of this perception of the intellectual. One is an undue romanticisation of poverty. The other is the illogical equation of austere lifestyle with intellectualism.

Of course solitude and deprivation create ready materials for rumination and for creativity. And of course the monk and the intellectual share some spheres. But the monastery provides all the basic necessities for the monk to thrive. Intellectuals as we now know them lack such a secured space. Besides, the world that gave birth to the equation of the intellectual with the monk and the mystification of a simple lifestyle as a necessary condition for intellectual work has since disappeared. The needs of an intellectual are still basic and simple. The problem is that in many parts of the world, these needs, as ordinary as they sound, are not taken care of. They are neither simple nor basic. The new world is a maze of conveniences, conveniences that enhance and diminish our lives, conveniences that enhance and could diminish the thought process.

Simple and Basic; But not So

For survival and effectiveness, the intellectual needs political/institutional, social and personal infrastructures. The personal is the most basic of all. The intellectual needs to be a human being and needs to live before he could engage in common and uncommon thought and before he could deploy his thought to the service of the society. The bulk of the world, however, is caught in the throes of social and economic absurdities that have pushed most people to the fringe of existence. When economies and social networks collapse, or totter on the edges, intellectuals are one of the first and enduring victims. Their clan is one of the most endangered.

To start with, an intellectual needs a decent job and a decent salary. This may sound too obvious. But in many parts of the world, the people who approximate the philosophers, the painters, the poets and the priests are the least respected and least remunerated. In Nigeria, for example, a university professor with 15 years experience earns the equivalent of \$70 a month. A receptionist without a university degree grudgingly earns as much in the same country. To start with, \$70 is not enough to sustain any young person who has no dependants. But this also means two things: the professor exists on the same reward scale as a receptionist and the professor cannot sustain himself on his salary, cannot send his children to school and cannot fulfil his social obligations. Initially, the professor might be impervious to this callous absurdity. He might look forward to his reward in heaven, or on earth, in the emancipation of his society. But eventually, reality comes calling, especially in a place where he could not live in total isolation from the society. He would need to survive. He would need to pay his bills and take care of his responsibilities. Then he needs to create alternative means of survival. But the other engagements swallow up much of his time. He is desperate. He is distracted. So caught up in an existential bind, he invests more energy on personal escapes. He still thinks and dreams, no doubt. But he thinks more of how to escape from the labyrinth of want. He thinks more in survivalist and mercantilist terms. The choking economy has made an unlikely but natural conversion.

An intellectual constantly needs to update his knowledge and share the products of his research and thought with the larger society. Here also, most intellectuals from the Third World are greatly incapacitated. The facilities for research are criminally comatose. I once did a newspaper article on the state of libraries in Nigeria. My research produced a very depressing result. You could guess how bad the situation was from the title of the feature story: "Nigerian Libraries: Morgue for Dead Books." I had made a round of the public libraries, the national libraries and university libraries. On the dusty and cobwebbed shelves, the most current book I could find was published in 1982. That story was written in 1993. Even now, seven years after and the beginning of a new millennium, the picture is still as grim and dusty as ever.

Professors and intellectuals thus don't have access to current books and journals. Most of the bookshops, including the ones in the universities, are empty. Some have been converted to more profitable ventures. The surviving ones stock only recommended and required texts. Those that have current and intellectually enriching books sell them at very unaffordable prices. A recent book in a well-stocked bookshop in Lagos cost about half the monthly salary of our professor. It is an unfair choice. But when confronted with feeding his children and buying books, a rational professor would be forgiven for choosing the former. If we accept the saying that "you are what you read"

most of the possible intellectuals in such a space have little or nothing insightful to offer. They either consume stale materials or nothing.

An intellectual should be able to live off his ideas, either through talks, published articles and books. Ordinarily, this should be a legitimate way of earning a living or subsidising one. In Nigeria and similar spaces, these facilities have collapsed, if they ever existed at all. Many give talks for free. People are paid peanuts for writing for newspapers and journals, if they are paid at all. The once thriving book industry is dead.

Even if the intellectual is able to survive the grind of workaday life and articulate his or her thoughts for the larger society, there is a great likelihood that the thoughts would not see the light of day because his manuscript would most likely gather dust in someone's drawers. What is common in Nigeria today is that writers and academics publish themselves or subsidise their publications. And this requires some financial outlay that few intellectuals could muster.

Eventual publication offers little solace. If he or she is lucky enough to be published, the works are not going to be given adequate visibility because publishers think publishing such effort is enough favour. And even if the published book is well displayed, few copies are sold because the potential buyers would have to make an unfair choice between the rumbles of their stomachs and the needs of their brains and souls.

Beyond the personal, the intellectual also needs a society that works. Like every other citizen, he or she needs good roads, potable and constant water, constant electricity supply, and adequate telecommunication facilities. These facilities define the quality of life. But they also impinge on the work of an intellectual. These facilities are so basic and ordinary that they are taken for granted in many societies. But for those who live in the back of beyond, these are luxury items.

Take electricity, for example. It is impossible to do serious intellectual work without electricity. The house would be unlit and hot, the computer cannot work unless powered by other means, the fax machine is grounded, and information gathering and processing becomes difficult. But life without light is the order in Nigeria. The situation is so bad that people who are lucky have electricity for about five hours in a day; while some live in perpetual darkness for months. Nigerians, obviously miffed but helpless, have changed the name of the electricity authority to Never Expect Power Always, instead of the Nigerian Electric Power Authority, NEPA. And when NEPA mercifully decides to lift the blanket of darkness, children and grown-ups instinctively crow: "up NEPA, up NEPA, up NEPA." It is that bad.

In Nigeria, telephone, that everyday means of communication, is still a luxury and a status symbol. The reason is simple: presently, it costs about \$1,500 and months of waiting to get a phone line. It would take a miracle for someone on an annual salary of \$840 to afford that.

Without electricity, without telephone, with the ever-present traffic snarl and pockmarked roads, life is more challenging and perhaps more fun. But this also means that so much time and energy would be wasted on simple activities. There is so much for the intellectual to do. But under such a choking and depressing circumstance, it takes a real miracle for an intellectual to thrive.

The Media as Centres of Engagement

The mass media, especially the print media, are central to the work of a public intellectual. They exemplify the modern public sphere and serve as both spheres of communication and action. Intellectuals all over are alive to the invaluable opportunity the media offer them and their works. Actually, in some parts of the world, the print media are one of the surviving domains of the intellectuals. But the media in many countries are greatly incapacitated, thereby limiting their usefulness to the thought process.

The media in a developing economy, as in other economies, are caught up in their own economic problems. Most media outfits are run as business enterprises and they are among the worst hit when an economy nose-dives. Their cost of production shoots up and advert patronage plunges. Because of this, newspapers and journals are very expensive. In an economy where many people ration the food they eat, newspapers thus become luxury items.

Media managers constantly look at the bottom-line. Editors hunt for news that can sell. This naturally leads to sensationalism and the tabloidisation of news. This could mean that except when intellectuals become controversial, are in bad conditions, or clamped down on, they are not good copies. The media should be the last bastion of intellectualism in most countries and actually they are. But the picture is grim: newspapers are expensive and cannot be afforded by many, the thinkers inclusive, and the intellectual rarely could have space and access in them.

But there is also the problem of official censorship. In many countries, censors and state security agencies keep a keen watch over contents of papers and magazines. Rulers in many countries don't make much fuss about the fact that they are not great fans of press freedom. They seize copies of newspapers they consider offensive, they close down publishing houses, trail journalists and clamp them into detention. Because of the views they hold and the kind of work they do, most intellectuals are necessarily anti-government. The intellectual thus risks being censored either by editors or by the state. Worse things could happen. He could be detained or even convicted of treason against the state. A thriving media industry, democracy and respect for fundamental human rights are thus important institutional infrastructures for intellectual life.

Most of the problems mentioned above could be eliminated by access to modern technology, especially information and communication technologies. For example, the Internet offers a new world of opportunities to all, especially the intellectual. He could be in constant touch with the world, he could have new facility for research, and he could publish his works, earn additional income, escape the censors and reach larger audience.

Though the Internet is adjudged to be the cheapest and most democratic media for now, it is still an elitist media in many countries. The Internet takes for granted certain things: a computer, a modem, a phone line and Internet connectivity. These basic things are still unaffordable in many parts of the world. In Nigeria, for example, a full Internet access for a year costs about \$ 1,000. In the United States, a better service costs about \$250 dollars per annum. It is no surprise therefore that though Africa constitutes 13 % of the world population, it has only 1% of world's Internet connectivity. By contrasts the United States and Canada, which make up 5 % of world population, have 52 % of world's Internet connectivity.

Ways of Escape

When unlucky to live in such a limiting space as Nigeria, the intellectual could choose to live with his fate or find a way out. Journalists, academics, poets, philosophers and writers actually have a number of choices even in a place as hostile as Nigeria. The intellectual could stick to his environment and slug it out against all the odds. He or she could become a trader, and consult for all manners of people and causes. Or he or she could do a bit of what almost all businessmen do in Nigeria: provide their own infrastructure.

Also he or she could also either "sell-out" Or "check-out". The intellectual could become part of the power structure or become the establishment intellectual. And indeed many have done that out of desperation or naivety. Or he or she could migrate to climes that provide better facilities for his or her work or better appreciation of his or her talents

Though they could be rationalised, and people have erected impressive arguments for the last two options, both produce their own moral problems. The establishment intellectual who ostensibly joined the other side because he or she wanted to change the system from within always ends up as an apologist for the system, becoming more of a "court intellectual."

The emigrating intellectual goes with the intention of bettering his or her lot and of improving the system back home. In certain ways, some of them succeed in doing that. They earn respectable and regular incomes and they fulfil their obligations. Some of them sustain some of their colleagues back home, buy them books and journals and give them useful contacts. But the brain drain further impoverishes the system, further diminishes its

capacity for intellectual work or regeneration. In a particular year, some departments at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, lost as many as five lectures each to the brain drain. In most instances the migrating academics and intellectuals are the best brains of the country.

To worsen matters, most of the migrating intellectuals are never fully integrated into the societies they migrate to. They live in different and sometimes hostile cultures. And as exiles--yes most of them are economic exiles--they subsist on the fringe. Most of them are not well positioned to influence the course of events in their new societies or in the old. Some end up doing things they hardly bargained for, from odd jobs to mercenary existence.

More meaningful ways of escape could be created by non-governmental organisations, and funding agencies. They could assist in rehabilitating the collapsed infrastructures and in stimulating intellectual works in the hostile environments by investing in both institutions and individuals.

They could support the universities with journals, books, computers and grants for researches; support the media and publishing industries by deepening their capacity for intellectual works; and liaise with governments and NGOs to ensure that premium is placed on basic facilities of intellectual life and on their reconstruction.

Also they could broaden the scope of the intellectual and create controlled environments suitable for intellectual works. And by exposing individual intellectuals to other cultures and thoughts through grants and scholarship schemes and by sponsoring or subsidising intellectual and artistic productions and by creating research and artistic centres in regional centres of the world, they could help in reversing the threatened spaces.

Though they should have cosmopolitan depths, intellectuals, I believe, function better in the own societies. So efforts should be concentrated on how to revamp their societies and make them more intellectual-friendly. In this regard, the exiled intellectuals should be encouraged and assisted to return home, where the actual work is. Many actually discover that they hate staying outside their countries. But they dread returning to a life without things as basic as electricity and water, not to talk of regular and respectable incomes. For them one fringe is obviously more attractive than the other is. Such fears could be conquered if conscious attempts are made to help in rehabilitating returning writers, artists, academics and intellectuals.

The stark and ugly reality is that the societies that are hostile to intellectuals and their works are exactly the ones in dire needs of the fruits of rigorous and creative thoughts.

They are societies that still need to be shaped and built, they are the confines that still need to be unshackled, they are the spaces that sorely need new meanings, new dreams and new visions. They cry for the merchants of

thoughts, the intellectuals, the "in tele sua sua" or whatever we choose to call them.